

was Marie Byrd Land. You heard of *Kindertotenlieder*? We did two weeks at *Kindertotenlieder*."

"I've heard there was a mass suicide in Marie Byrd Land. Sometimes, you can't escape. The memories follow you. Are memories all that's following you, effendi?"

I clasped my jaw in an attempt to soothe my aching teeth. My machismo – such as it was – had evaporated. How could I tell them I'd broken parole? They might understand my crimes; they might sympathize; but I couldn't expect them to freely offer safe haven; like their ghosts, their refugee status in the city states strung along the Trans-Antarctic Highway was continually threatened by diplomatic pressure from top-side.

If only I could rest up. A little therapy, a course of Xanax, a few weeks on a beach...

The boy studied me with death-obsessed eyes. "Memories," I said. "Yeah – the witch-hunts, the abuse, the straitjacket on the imagination." Decadent, candyass whingeing, I knew, to one such as him. "But I guess it was tougher for you guys." A piece of shrapnel was lodged under his right cheek, gleaming like polished bone. Kids made such exquisite killers. Malleable; better soldiers than adults. Kidnap them; seduce them with ghosts; they'll do anything you ask. But if these children had become fundamentalists, then it was Hollywood, the *De Luxe*, the transnationalism of glamour, sex and money that they had dreamed of as martyrdom's prize; Islam never inspired such fanaticism. Paradise was for those who consumed.

"Sure is tougher. All you been done for is collaboration, eh? Our ghosts and we been through hell, man. Our masters told us we were going to get the goods" – an embarrassed hiatus – "told us we'd have more food than we could eat, just like the people on TV. And not just food. The life, man, the *life*. But it was all lies." How could they have ever hoped to win? The North held the world's purse strings; dictated to the South, gorging itself on the Third World's raw material and food. The child crusade had been chaotic, their battles resembling riot rather than strategy. How could they have successfully warred against the *conquistadores* of development, advertising and the media when they had so lusted after what they would destroy?

These boys and their masters had wanted a Northern life such as I had enjoyed; but they had been afforded only glimpses, the tantalizing simulacra of paradise; they had wanted it all.

I pulled off my balaclava. "Please, I need to sleep. I've been driving all night." I didn't want to be interrogated; I was tired of dissembling. As I thawed, my poker face was sure to crack, sure to combust like a leaky graveyard.

"Straitjacket on the imagination?" The boy had imitated my accent, assuming the cadences of "bibelot," the prêt-à-porter streethowl of the *De Luxe*, the plummy, razorblade rhetoric of one raised in a world of corrupt elegance. He smirked, pressing his advantage. "All you ever had was a rap over the knuckles."

"More than that. I was a whipping boy for their

insanity." I sighed. "You know how the law is. I was evil, they said, but at the same time they thought I was a *tabula rasa* corrupted by too much surfing, too many violent *manga*. Now, I ask you, I'm either evil, that is, I have committed an evil act of my own volition, or else I'm innocent, and the blame lies in the hands of the image-world. But they wanted it both ways. I was evil because I was possessed; I was possessed because I was evil; and I had to be punished to drive the demon out. Positively *medieval*." They blamed the Dahlia videos. The videos and the Dahlia comics. The comics and the Dahlia site on the Net. And they blamed me. Blamed me for being *possessed*. There's that scene in *A Chinese Killer Virgin in LA* where... But they blamed children for everything in those days. Still did, of course, otherwise I wouldn't have been having this conversation with a fellow out-cast. "But I tell you, it wasn't Dahlia's fault." No; The danger wasn't in the fibresphere. It never is. The danger was at home.

Decadent? Candyass?

I too had been a killer.

I had always known that, some day, some how, I would have to kill my stepfather. It was a passion I had kept too long to myself; not out of shame, but because I always took such pleasure in knowing things, terrible things, unspeakable things, that other people would not even dare to suspect. Dinner was the hour when it became hardest to camouflage my secret. Suffering my stepfather's sarcasm, his hideous opinions, his cant, I would chew each portion of my meal into pap in an effort to restrain declaring myself. "Stepfather," I had wanted to say, "*not today, not tomorrow, and not even next week or next month, but some day, and surely some day soon, I will destroy you...*"

Dahlia had been my only friend.

I put my head in my hands; melting snow seeped between my fingers. "I've just got out of Boys' Town. What else do you need to know? I've done ghost wedding and I've been punished for it. I'm the same as you." Yeah, I thought ruefully, a murderer, and a pimp to boot. "Please, you must help." A susurrant of voices; I looked up; several boys had gathered in the doorway.

"Sure," said their leader, loosening his greatcoat, playing to the mob, "everybody here mixed with The Censors. Everybody done Boys' Town, been deprogrammed, dispossessed. But how come you in the Town so long, effendi? You old, man, you old." My interlocutor would have been from the original Boys' Town, the POW gulag that wormed across the world's demographic-technological faultline, the cleavage that separated the Mediterranean, the Rio Grande, the Slavic and non-Slavic, Australia and Indonesia. As The Great Fear had spread, so had the gulag, consolidating itself along the borders of the young, overpopulated societies of the South even as it insinuated itself into the rich, geriatric societies of the North. I remembered TV pictures of the crusade, the ant-like armies of children, that, until recently, had surged upwards towards the borders of the developed world, wave after wave; children from Africa, Asia, Latin

From *Millennium of Movies!* (Microsoft-Grolier-Murdoch, Singapore 1999):

*CyberNaff*: Term first coined in *Interzone* 106 (April 1996) to describe definitive sf movie genre of the 90s, in which cinema attempts to evoke on screen the hipness and highs of information surfing by spurious recourse to flashy computer-generated psychedelia, ludicrous half-baked technologic, pompous affectation of social commentary on dangers of virtual experience, and cringemaking cod-Gibsonian dialogue of the "OK, slip on the 'trodes and jack in" school. See *Lawnmower Man*, *Brainscan*, *Johnny Mnemonic*, *Lawnmower Man 2*, *Virtuosity*, *Lawnmower Man 3: Revenge of the Lawn*, etc., etc. Mainly remarkable for the fact that *Strange Days* partakes wholeheartedly of the genre yet remains without much contest the strongest sf film of its decade. See *review*.

*Strange Days* (1995): There are several fine films here. One is simply a thoroughbred of sheer technical craftsmanship out of Kathryn Bigelow, director, by James Cameron, screenwriter and superbeing, easily the two most interesting people in Hollywood ever to have been married to one another. It's no belittlement of a deeply layered film to say that one of the many levels on which *Strange Days* satisfies is as a showcase for the pure virtuosity of a writer and a director with a dazzling command of medium and technique, both working at their absolute peak. Here the things about *Strange Days* that have tended to draw most comment – its "darkness," violence, genderedness – give a slightly misleading impression. I don't really understand why what's, amongst much else, an enormously high-quality rollercoaster movie in the authentic Cameron tradition should have hit the US box office so belly-first; but perhaps the first thing that ought to be said about *Strange Days* is that, quite aside from all else, it's a gloriously smart, speedy entertainment with an exhilarating confidence in its craft, and with a staggeringly convoluted plot packed with red herrings, conspiracies, McGuffins and wrong-footings that amply makes up in sheer quantity and pace what it lacks in actual sense.

Rightly or wrongly, though, the *Strange Days* that tends to get more noticed is the thoughtful, if unavoidably meretricious, science-fictional update of *Peeping Tom*, in which cinema takes a hard look at the appetites that sustain it and doesn't entirely relish what it finds. At the bargain cost of a dodgy plot device (portable black-market brain recorders as the new illegal high), *Strange Days* has a

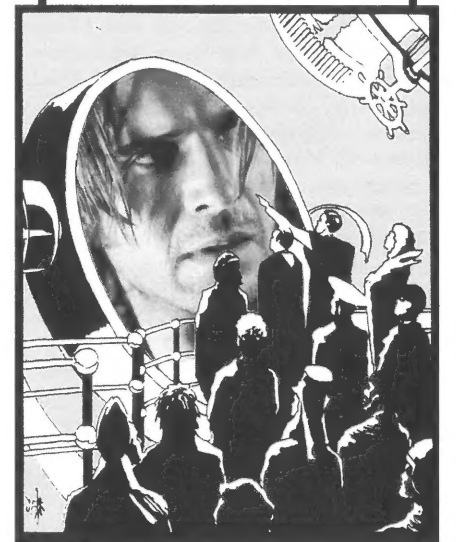
superbly-engineered metaphor for exploring the relationship between real life, memory, and entertainment, and forcing the viewer to confront some nasty images of sexual violence and snuff being peddled as thrills. But one of the key strengths is that the Gibson-pilfered SQUID set with its total-*verité* "playback" isn't simply an sf metaphor for film, but rather a distillation of what cinema only approaches – recognizing cinema itself as an early approximation to something richer and realer than one day (though hardly by 1999) will arrive to replace it, and which will address the deep desires for immersive virtual experience in a world plunging towards social and informational meltdown.

Now, aside from the CyberNaff element of immersivity, these aren't tremendously new ideas. They were thoughtfully, if a little clumsily, aired in Tavernier's 1980 *Death Watch* (and rather better in the novel on which it was based, D.G. Compton's *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe*). If anything, *Strange Days*' twin themes of voyeurism and escapism tangle in one another's way, as the complex moral and thematic focus progressively shifts from the problematic desire for extremes of experience ("Everyone needs a walk to the dark end of the street now and again") to the clearer-cut issue of substituting virtual experience for real. Thus Rafe Fiennes' sad, hustling lead tries to keep his act clean ("You know I don't deal snuff," he high-mindedly complains after we've shared his experience of the opening set piece) is himself both pusher and addict, shooting up between deals on his own recorded

Angela Bassett in *Strange Days* ...at heart she's basically just a working single mom who happens to dress like a goddess...



## MUTANT POPCORN



NICK LOWE

memories of not-very-convincing sex with Juliette Lewis as an escape from the failures of his actual life. ("The trouble with you," explains Lewis's new proprietor, "is you assume that you have a life, when in fact you're just peddling bits of other people's lives, and the broken bits of your own.") It's disappointing that the movie cops out in the final reckoning by arguing, in effect, that the real moral issue isn't the virtuality of experience but its truth or fictionality, so that film, being made-up, still has the moral edge over playback, which pimps on actual people's actual lives and deaths. ("You know one way," says Lewis, "that movies are still better than playback? Because the music comes up, there's credits, and you know it's over.") *Strange Days* gets away with the material it does by wrapping them up in a suitably distancing and ironizing nest of audience frames, so that we watch (for example) the notorious serial kills through the eyes of the killer, through the appalled eyes of Fiennes and friends, through the camera of a woman; but all this contributes to a mounting sense of backing-off from what might have been a more dangerous film than it is.

In the end, though what does make *Strange Days* a genuinely fine essay in speculation, in defiance of its fairly incredible and at best nearly-new technological premise, is that it's genuinely interested in the future as future, rather than as a metaphoric extension of the present. *Strange Days* is, literally, dated from the start, its teeming plot virtuosically crammed into a single momentous day: the last hours of 1999, when the 20th century girds itself for the big